



THE FAULT

BY MAY SINCLAIR

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GIBSON used to say that he would never marry, because no other woman could be half as nice as his own mother. Then, of course, he broke his mother's heart by marrying a woman who was not nice at all.

He was a powerful fellow with a plain, square face, and a manner that was perfection to the people whom he liked. Unfortunately, they were very few. He did not like any of the ladies whom his mother wanted him to like, not even when they reproduced for him her gentle, delicate distinction.

The younger Mrs. Gibson had none of it; but she had ways with her, and a power that was said to reside supremely in her hands, her arms, and her hair—especially her hair (she was the white and golden kind). It was as long as a lasso and as ample as a cloak. Gibson loved her hair. The sight and the scent of it filled him with folly. He liked to braid and unbraid it, to lay his face against it, to plunge his hands through the coolness into the warmth of it.

It seemed to him to give out the splendor and vitality of her, to have a secret

sympathy with the thought that stirred beneath it.

She had a trick, when she was thinking, of caressing it, of winding and unwinding the little curls that sprang aureole-wise above her temples. That was one of her ways, and it brought her hands and arms into play with stupendous effect.

He would sit opposite her a whole evening, watching it, dumb with excess of happiness.

It took him six months to find out that the trick he admired so much was a sign that his wife was bored to extinction.

"Is there anything you want?" he said. She laughed hysterically.

"You 've only to say what you want, and I 'll get it for you, if it can be got."

"It could be got all right," said she, "but I doubt whether you 'd care very much to get it."

"What is it? Tell me—tell me."

"Well—you 're very nice, my dear, I know, but before I married you I used—though you might n't think it—to be received in society."

He took her back to it. He said he was a selfish brute to want to keep her to

himself. That speech amused Mrs. Gibson immensely. She had a curious and capricious sense of humor. It made her very adaptable, and tided them both over a sharp season of infelicity.

Hitherto Mrs. Gibson had been merely bored; now she was seized with a malady of unrest. Any other man but Gibson would have been driven mad with her nerves.

"You're doing too much, you know," he said, soothing her. "You're tired."

She raised her eyebrows.

"Oh, no," she said, "not *tired*."

He meditated.

"What you want," said he, "is a thorough change."

"My dear," said she, "I did n't know you were so clever."

"Would you like me to take a cottage in the country?"

"A cottage? In the country?"

"Well, of course, not too far from town. Some place where I could run down for the week-ends."

"You would n't," said she, "be running down oftener?"

"No," he said; "I'm afraid I could n't just at present."

"Don't you think it might be a trifle lonely?"

"You can have any one you like to stay with you."

She smiled.

"And you really want to take it—this cottage?"

"Yes."

"Well, then," said she, "take it by all means, and lose no time."

He took it, and went down with her for the first week-end.

It was a tiny place, but some one had built a comfortable smoking-room at the back. It opened by glass doors into the garden.

One Sunday evening they were sitting together in the smoking-room when she flung herself down on the floor beside him and hid her head on his knee. She seized his hand and drew it down to her.

"As you are going to leave me to-morrow," she said, "you can stroke my hair to-night."

He went down every week-end. And every week-end he found an improvement in his wife's health. When he complimented her upon her appearance, she told

him she had been gardening. He took it as an excellent sign that she should be fond of gardening.

Then one day Gibson, who worked like ten horses to provide all the things that his wife wanted, got ill, and was told to take a month off in the country.

That was in the middle of the week. He saw his doctor early in the evening and took the last train down. The cottage was several miles from the nearest telegraph office, so that he arrived before the wire that should have announced his coming.

A short cut from the station brought him to the back of the house through a little wood that screened it. The wood-path led into his garden by a private gate which at this hour was always locked.

He climbed the gate and crossed the grass-plot to the glass doors of the smoking-room. The lamps were lighted there, and Gibson, as he approached, could see his wife sitting in the low chair opposite his. His heart bounded at the sight of her. He was glad to think that she sat in his room when he was away. He walked quickly over the grass and stood at the glass doors looking in.

She was lying back in the low chair. In *his* chair, which a curtain had concealed from him until now, there sat a man he knew. He recognized the narrow shoulders and the head with the sleek brown hair, showing a little fallow patch of baldness at the back. From a certain tenseness in the man's attitude he knew that his gaze was fastened on the woman who faced them. Her left arm was raised; its long, loose sleeve fell back and bared it; her fingers twisted and untwisted a little straying curl.

The man could bear it no longer. He jumped up and went to her; he knelt beside her; with one hand he seized her arm by the full, white wrist and dragged it down and held it to his lips. The other hand smoothed back her hair into its place and held it there. His fine, nervous fingers sank through the deep and silky web to the white, sensitive skin. The woman threw back her head and closed her eyes, every nerve throbbing felinely under the caress she loved.

The man rose with an uneasy movement that brought him to the back of her chair. He stooped and whispered some-

thing. She flung up her arms and drew down his face to hers under the white arch they made.

Gibson did nothing scandalous. He went round quietly to the front door and let himself in with his latch-key. When he entered the smoking-room he found his wife there alone. She stood on his hearth, and met him with hard eyes, desperate and defiant.

"What have you to say for yourself?" he said.

"Everything," said she. "Of course you will divorce me."

"Will a separation not satisfy you?"

"No," she said, "it will not. If you have n't had proof enough, I can give you more—or you can ask the servants."

He had always given her what she wanted: he gave it to her now.

II

GIBSON went and lived with his mother. The incident left him apparently unscathed. He showed no signs of trouble until four years after, when his mother died. Then the two shocks rolled into one, and for a year Gibson was a wreck.

At last he was told, as he had been told before, to stop work and go away—anywhere—for a rest. He went to a small seaside town in east Devon.

The man's nature was so sound that in a month's time he recovered sufficiently to take an interest in what was going on around him.

He was lodged in one of a row of small houses facing the esplanade. Each had its own plot of green garden spread before it, and a flagged pathway leading from the gate to the door. Path and garden were raised a good half-foot above the level of the sidewalk, and this half-foot, Gibson observed, was a serious embarrassment to his next-door neighbors.

Twice a day a bath-chair with an old gentleman in it would emerge from the doorway of the house next door. It was drawn by two little ladies, a dark one and a fair one, whom Gibson judged to be the old gentleman's daughters. He must have weighed considerably, that old gentleman, and the ladies, especially the dark one, were far too young and small and tender for such draft-work. Four

times a day at the garden-gate a struggle took place between the little ladies and the bath-chair. Gibson could see them from the window where he lay, supine in his nervous apathy. Their going out was only less fearful than their coming in. Going out, it was very hard to prevent the back wheels from slipping down with a bump on to the pavement and shaking the old gentleman horribly. Coming in they risked overturning him altogether.

You would not have known that there was any struggle going on, the old gentleman bore himself with so calm and high a heroism, the little ladies were sustained by so pure a sense of the humors of the bath-chair. No sharp, irritating cries escaped them. They did nothing but laugh softly as they pulled and pushed and tugged with their women's arms, and heaved with delicate shoulders, or hung on, in their frenzy, from behind, while the bath-chair swayed ponderously and perilously above the footway.

Gibson sometimes wondered whether he ought not to rush out and help them. But he could n't; he did n't really care.

His landlady told him that the old gentleman was a General Richardson, that he was paralyzed, that his daughters waited on him hand and foot, that they were too poor to afford a man-servant to look after him and push the bath-chair. It was not much of a life, the woman said, for the two young ladies. Gibson agreed that it was not much of a life, certainly.

What pleased him was the fine levity with which they took it. He was always meeting them in their walks on the esplanade. Sometimes they would come racing down the wind with the bath-chair, their serge skirts blown forward, their hair curling over the brims of their sailor hats. The dark one was particularly attractive in a high wind. Then they would come back much impeded, their skirts wrapped tight about their knees, their little bodies bent to the storm, their faces wearing still that invincible gaiety of theirs. Sometimes, on a gentle incline, they would let the bath-chair run on a little by itself, till it threatened a dangerous independence, when they would fly after it at the top of their speed, and arrest it just in time. Gibson could never make out whether they did this for their

own amusement or the old gentleman's. But sometimes, when the general came careering past him, he could catch the glance of a bright and affable eye that seemed to call on him to observe the extent to which an old fellow might yet enjoy himself.

Gibson's lodging gave him endless opportunity for studying the habits of his little ladies. He learned that they did everything in turns. They took it in turns to pull the bath-chair and to push it. They took it in turns to read aloud to the old gentleman, to put him to bed at night, and get him up in the morning. They took it in turns to go to church (did they become suddenly serious, he wondered, there?) and in turns to air themselves on a certain little plateau on the cliff-side.

He was next to find out that they nursed the monstrous ambition of urging the bath-chair up the hill and landing it on the plateau. Gibson was sorry for them, for he knew they could never do it. But such was their determination that each time that he encountered them on the hill they had struggled a little farther up it.

The road had a sort of hump in it just before it forked off on to the cliff. That baffled them.

At last, as he himself was returning from the plateau, he came upon the sisters right in the middle of the rise, locked in deadly combat with the bath-chair. Pressed against it, shoulder to shoulder, they resisted its efforts to hurl itself violently backward down the hill. The general, as he clung to the arms of the chair, preserved his attitude of superb indifference to the event.

Gibson leaped to their assistance. With a threefold prodigious effort they topped the rise, and in silence, in a sort of solemn triumph, the bath-chair was wheeled on to the plateau.

He liked the simplicity with which they accepted his aid, and he liked the way they thanked him, both sisters becoming very grave all at once. It was the fair one who spoke. The dark one only bowed and smiled as he lifted his cap and turned away.

"It's all very well," he heard her saying, "but how are we going to get him down again?"

How were they?

He hung about the cliff-side till the time came for them to return, when he presented himself as if by accident.

"You must allow me," he said, "to see you safe to the bottom of the hill."

They allowed him.

"You see,"—the general addressed his daughters as they paused half-way,— "we've accomplished it, and no bones are broken."

"Yes," said Gibson, "but is n't the expedition just a little dangerous?"

"Ah," said the general, "I've risked my life too many times to mind a little danger now."

Gibson's eyebrows said plainly: "It was n't *your* life, old boy, I was thinking of."

The sisters looked away.

"You must never attempt that again," he said gravely, as he parted from them at the foot of the hill.

Gibson felt that he had done a good morning's work. He had saved the lives of the three Richardsons, and he had found out that the fair one's name was Effie and the dark one's Phoebe.

After that the acquaintance ripened. They exchanged salutes whenever they met. Then Gibson, moved beyond endurance by their daily strife with the bath-chair, was generally to be seen at their gateway in time to help them.

As the days grew longer, the Richardsons began to take their tea out-of-doors on their grass-plot. And then it seemed to strike them all at once that the gentleman next door was lonely, and one afternoon they invited him to tea.

Then Gibson had his tea served on his grass-plot, and invited the Richardsons, and the Richardsons—they were so absurdly grateful—invited him to supper and to spend the evening. They thanked him for coming. "It was such a pleasure," Effie said (Effie was the elder)— "such a great pleasure to Father."

Gibson hardly thought his society could be a pleasure to any one, but he tried to make himself useful. He engaged himself as the general's bath-chair man. He bowled him along at the round pace he loved, while the little ladies, Effie and Phoebe, trotted after them, friendly and gay.

And he began to go in and out next

door as a matter of course, till it was open to the little sisters to regard him as their own very valuable property. But they were not going to be selfish about him. Oh, no! They took him as they took everything else, in turns. They tried hard to divide him fairly. If he attached himself to Effie, the fair one, Effie would grow uneasy, and she would get up and positively hand him over to Phœbe, the dark one. If Phœbe permitted herself to talk to him for a while, her eyes would call to Effie, and when Effie came, she would slip away and take up her sad place by the general's arm-chair. In their innocent rivalry it was who could give him up more completely to the other. And as Phœbe was the more determined little person, it was Phœbe who generally had it her own way. "Father," too, came in for his just share. Gibson felt that he would not be tolerated on any footing that kept "Father" out of it. There was always a moment in the evening when he would be led up to the arm-chair, and both Effie and Phœbe would withdraw and leave him to that supreme communion.

There was a third sister, he knew now. She was the eldest and her name was Mary. She was away somewhere in the North, recovering, he gathered, from "Father,"—of course they took it in turns to recover from him,—while Father wandered up and down the south coast, endeavoring, vainly, to recover from himself. They told Gibson that the one thing that spoiled it all (the joy, they meant, of their intercourse with him) was the thought that Mary was "missing it." Had Mary been there, she would have had to have her share, her fourth.

Presently he realized that Phœbe—he supposed because of her superior determination—had effaced herself altogether. She was always doing dreary things, he noticed, out of her turn. Then he perceived a change in her. Little Phœbe, in consequence of all the dreary things she did, was beginning to grow thin and pale. She looked as if she wanted more of the tonic air of the cliff-side. She did still take her turn at climbing to the plateau and sitting there all alone. But that, Gibson reflected, was, after all, for Phœbe, a very dreary thing to do.

One evening he took courage and asked

Phœbe to come for a walk to the cliff-side with him.

Phœbe did not answer all at once. She shrank, he could see, from the enormity of having him all to herself.

"Go," said Effie; "it will do you worlds of good."

"You go."

Effie laughed and shook her head.

"Come, too, then. Mr. Gibson, say she 's to come, too!"

"You know," said Effie, "it 's my turn to stay with Father."

She said it severely, as if Phœbe had been trying unfairly to deprive her of a privilege and a delight. They were delicious, Phœbe and Effie, but it was Phœbe that he wanted this time.

They set out at a brisk pace that brought the blood to Phœbe's cheeks and made her prettier than ever. Phœbe, of course, had done her best to make her prettiness entirely unobtrusive. She wore a muslin shirt and a tie, and a sailor hat which was not specially becoming to her small head, and her serge skirt had to be both wide and short because of pushing the bath-chair about through all kinds of weather. But the sea-wind caught her; it played with her hair; it blew a little dark curl out of place to hang distractingly over Phœbe's left ear; it blew the serge skirt tight about her limbs, and showed him, in spite of Phœbe, how prettily Phœbe was made.

"Why did n't you back me up?" said Phœbe. "She wanted to come all the time."

He turned, as he walked, to look at her.

"Why did n't I back you up? Do you, really want to know why?"

Whenever he took that tone, Phœbe looked solemn and a little frightened. She was frightened now, too frightened to answer him.

"Because," said he, "I wanted you all to myself."

"Oh!" Phœbe drew a long, terrified breath.

There are many ways of saying "Oh," but Gibson had never, never in his whole life, heard any woman say it as Phœbe said it then. It meant that she was staggered at anybody having the temerity to want anything all to himself.

"Do you think me very selfish?"

Phoebe assured him instantly that that had never been her idea of him.

"Shall I tell you who *is* selfish?"

Phoebe's little mouth hardened. She was so dreadfully afraid that he was going to say "Your father."

"You," he said—"you."

"I 'm afraid I am," said she. "It 's so hard not to be."

He stood still in his astonishment, so that she had to stand still, too.

"Of course it 's hard not to give up things when you like giving them up; but Miss Effie likes giving them up, too, and it 's selfish of you to prevent her, is n't it?"

"Oh, but you don't know what it 's been—Effie's life and Mary's."

"And yours—"

"Oh, no; I 'm happy enough. I 'm the youngest."

"You mean you 've had a year or two less of it."

"Yes. They never told me, for fear of making me unhappy, when Father's illness came."

"How long ago was that?"

"Five years ago. I was at school."

He made a brief calculation. During the two years of his married life, Phoebe had been a child at school.

"And two years," said Phoebe, "is a long time to be happy in."

"Yes," he said; "it 's a long time."

"And then," she went on presently, "I 'm so much stronger than Effie and Mary."

"Not strong enough to go dragging that abominable bath-chair about."

"Not strong enough? Look!"

She held out her right arm for him to look at; beneath the muslin sleeve he saw its tense roundness, and its whiteness through the slit above her wrist.

His heart stirred in him. Phoebe's arms were beautiful, and they were strong to help.

"I wish," he said, "I could make it better for you."

"Oh, but you *have* made it better for us. You can't think what a difference you 've made."

"Have I? Have I?"

"Yes. Effie said so only the other day. She wrote it to Mary. And Mary says it 's a shame she can't be here. It is, you know. It makes us feel so mean having you all to ourselves like this."

He laughed. He laughed whenever he thought of it. There was nobody who could say things as Phoebe said them.

"I wish," said she, "you knew Mary. You 'd like her so."

"I 'm sure I should, if she 's at all like you."

Her innocence sheltered him, made him bold.

"Oh, but she is n't."

And he listened while she gave him a long list of Mary's charms. Dear little tender, unconscious Phoebe!

"She sounds," he said, "very like you."

"She is n't the least bit like me. You don't know me."

"Don't I?"

"Mary 's coming back at the end of the month. Then either I or Effie will go away. Do you think you 'll still be here?"

He seemed to her to answer absently.

"Which of you, did you say, was going away?"

"Well, it 's Effie's turn."

"Yes," he said; "I think I shall still be here."

One night, a week later, the two sisters sat talking together long after "Father" had been put to bed.

"Phoebe," said Effie, "why did you want me to come with you and Mr. Gibson?"

"Because—" said Phoebe.

"My dear, it 's you he likes, not me."

"Don't, Effie!"

"But it 's true," said Effie.

"How can you tell?" said Phoebe, and she felt perfidious.

"Is n't he always going about with you?"

But Phoebe was ingenious in the destruction of her own joy.

"Oh," said she, "that 's his cunning. He likes you dreadfully. He goes about with me just to hide it."

"You goose!"

"Are you sure, Effie, you don't care?"

"Not a rap."

"You never did? Not in the beginning?"

"Certainly not in the beginning. I only thought he might be nice for you."

"You did n't even want to divide him?"

Effie shook her head vehemently.

"Well—he 's the only thing I ever

wanted all to myself. If—" Then Phœbe looked frightened. "Effie," she said, "he 's never said anything."

"All the same, you *know*."

"Can you know?"

"I think so," said Effie.

III

GIBSON had been talking a long time to Phœbe. They were sitting together on the beach, under the shadow of the cliff. He was trying to form Phœbe's mind. Phœbe's mind was deliciously young, and it had the hunger and thirst of youth. A little shy and difficult to approach, Phœbe's mind, but he had found out what it liked best, and it pleased him to see how confidently and delicately it, so to speak, ate out of his hand.

He puzzled her a good deal, and she had a very pretty way of closing her eyes when she was puzzled. In another woman it would have meant that he was boring her; Phœbe did it to shut out the intolerable light of knowledge.

"Ah—don't!" he cried.

"Don't shut my eyes? I always shut my eyes when I 'm trying to think," said Phœbe.

He said nothing. That was not what he had meant when he had said "Don't!"

"Am I boring you?" he said presently. His tone jarred a little on Phœbe. He had such a nice voice generally.

"No," said she. "Why?"

"Because you keep on doing that."

"Doing what?"

"That."

"Oh—this?"

She put up her hand and untwisted the little tendril of brown hair that hung, deliciously, over her left ear.

"I always do that when I 'm thinking."

He very nearly said, "Then, for God's sake, don't think!"

But Phœbe was always thinking now.

He began to hate the little brown curl that hung over her left ear, though it was anguish to him to hate anything that was Phœbe's. He looked out with nervous anxiety for the movement of her little white hand. He said to himself, "If she does it again, I can't come near her any more."

Yet he kept on coming, and was happy with her until Phœbe, poor predestined

little Phœbe, did it again. Gibson shuddered with the horror of the thing. He kept on saying to himself: "She 's sweet, she 's good, she 's adorable; it is n't her fault. But I can't—I can't sit in the room with it."

And the next minute Phœbe would be so adorable that he would repent miserably of his brutality.

Then, one hot still evening, he was alone with her in the little sitting-room. Outside, on the grass-plot, her father sat in his bath-chair while Effie read aloud to him (out of her turn). Her voice made a cover for Gibson's voice and Phœbe's.

Phœbe was dressed, for the heat, in a white gown with wide, open sleeves. Her low collar showed the pure, soft swell of her neck to the shoulder-line.

She was sitting upright and demure in a straight-backed chair, with her hands folded quietly in her lap.

"That is n't a very comfortable chair you 've got," he said.

He knew that she was tired with pushing the bath-chair about all day.

"It 's the one I always sit in," said Phœbe.

"Well, you 're not going to sit in it now," said he.

He drew the arm-chair out of its sacred corner and made her sit in that. He put a cushion at her head and a footstool at her feet.

"You make my heart ache," he said.

"Do I?"

He could not tell whether the little shaking breath she drew were a laugh or a sigh.

She lay back, letting her tired body slacken into rest. The movement loosened the little combs that kept the coil of her brown hair in place. Phœbe abhorred dishevelment. She put up her hands to her head. Her wide sleeve fell back, showing the full length of her white arms.

He saw another woman stretching her arms to the man who leaned above her. He saw the movement of her hands—hands of the same texture and whiteness as her body, instinct with its impulses. A long procession of abominations passed through the white arch of her arms, the arch she raised in triumph and defiance, immortalizing her sin.

He was very tender with Phœbe that night, for his heart was wrung with compunction.

"I adore her," he said to himself; "but I can't live with *that*."

Gibson left by the early train next day. He went without saying good-by, and without leaving an explanation or an address.

Phœbe held her head high, and said, day after day, "There 's sure to be a letter."

Three weeks passed, and no letter came. Phœbe saw that it was all over.

One day she was found (Effie found her) on her bed, crying. She was so weak that she let Effie take her in her arms.

"If I only knew what I had done!" she said. "Oh, Effie, what could have made him go away?"

"I can't tell you, my lamb. You must n't think about him any more."

"I can't help thinking. You see, it 's not as if he had n't been so nice."

"He could n't have been nice to treat you that way."

"He did n't," said Phœbe, fiercely. "He did n't treat me any way. I sometimes think I must have made it all up out of my own head. Did I?"

"No, no. I 'm sure you did n't."

"It would have been awful of me. But I 'd rather be awful than have to think that he was. What *is* my worst fault, Effie?"

"Your worst fault, in his eyes, is that you have none."

Phœbe sat up on the edge of the bed. She was thinking hard. And as she thought her hand went up, caressing unconsciously the little brown curl.

"If I only knew," said she, "what I had done."

Gibson never saw Phœbe Richardson again. But a year later, as he turned suddenly on to the esplanade of a strange watering-place, he encountered the bath-chair, drawn by Effie and another lady. He made way, lifting his cap mechanically to its occupant.

The general looked at him. The courteous old hand checked itself in the salute. The affable smile died grimly.

Effie turned away her head. The other lady (it must have been "Mary") raised her eyes in somber curiosity.

Phœbe was not with them. Gibson supposed that she was away somewhere, recovering in her turn.

